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ILLUSTRATION: TAPAS RANJAN

PRANAB MUKHERJEE • 11 DECEMBER 1935 • 31 AUGUST 2020

Former President Pranab Mukherjee loses battle for life at Delhi's Army hospital; was seen as the encyclopaedia of contemporary Indian history; was accorded Bharat Ratna in 2019

THE PM INDIA NEVER HAD

SANTWANA BHATTACHARYA

PRANAB Mukherjee was the prime minister that India never had. Instead, he became President—the 13th in India's line, bringing a rare political gravitas to that role. But it was the other office, that of the highest executive, that destiny seemed to have held out for him more than once—and ultimately denied. Not because he lacked stature, statesmanship or political heft. If there was one thing he lacked, it was the direct connect of the mass leader, but then he was almost the perfect embodiment of the other kind of politician—the savant, policy maven and parliamentarian in whom the spirit of institutions seemed to find their fullest expression.

Often fondly called the encyclopaedia of contemporary Indian history, current affairs and constitutional norms, Mukherjee, who died after a chest infection and long related illnesses at Delhi's Army Referral Hospital on Monday, indeed leaves a void in Indian polity, never to be filled.

A man who could be the accessible Pranabda to all and sundry, and still inspire awe and respect—the eminence grise who could admonish anyone and everyone, whenever he thought it fit.

When he took oath as President in July 2012—a long way from his humble village in Birbhum, West Bengal, where he walked miles through rice fields to reach his school—he was expected to be a 'political' president. But he surprised even veteran analysts by being a textbook President. Never overstepping the boundaries of constitutional proprieties and his own inclusive, democratic moorings.

Unlike a Giani Zail Singh or K R Narayanan, Mukherjee did not see Rashtrapati Bhawan as an oppositional space to government. That's why he could straddle the transition from UPA to NDA, from Manmohan Singh to Narendra Modi, without a glitch. No surprise he was accorded the highest civilian award of the land, the much coveted Bharat Ratna in 2019.

However, nor was it the case that he had retreated into a grand mansion of silence. If he chose to intervene, it was not by returning legislation passed by Parliament, like some of his predecessors. Having been on the other side, he knew the sanctity of that space. Instead, he used his constitutionally mandated speeches as President to point to aberrations he noticed—thus becoming a vital stabilising figure at a very transitional time.

In that sense, much like A B Vajpayee, Mukherjee was a child, a byproduct of parliamentary democracy. He truly believed in the power of debate. He was, indeed, very pained and disturbed in his last years about the decline in parliamentary functioning, and its image, centrality and prestige.

A quintessential Congress politician, Mukherjee was neither above contradiction nor a stranger to the little intrigues of Delhi politics. He, after all, was witness to several transitions, the Emergency, two assassinations, liberalisation, the emergence of the BJP. Though it was the Congress and a reluctant Sonia Gandhi who let him make an honourable transition to presidentship, he nurtured the hurt of having been passed up for the PM's job.

Once, after Indira Gandhi, when her son Rajiv succeeded her, and not Mukherjee, then the senior most Cabinet minister. Later, twice, as Sonia chose Manmohan Singh over him in 2004, and did not deem it fit to even make him Home Minister (as he had told me in an interview), and when she continued with Singh despite UPA's dwindling reputation.

He had to nearly engineer an escape to Rashtrapati Bhavan lest he be stuck in a Congress with a generation closer to his daughter Sharmistha's age group, some of whom had neither the savvy nor the humbleness to learn the ropes. No one, however, understood Mukherjee's political mind as much as Sonia, who once famously said she couldn't think of a CWC meeting without "Pranabda". She is also said to have admitted that sidelining Pranab was Rajiv Gandhi's biggest mistake. Minus his astute political instincts guiding him, Rajiv lurched from one crisis to another.

Despite the hurt of having to report to Singh, once an official in his ministry when he was FM in the 80s, Mukherjee worked hard for the UPA regime in various top ministries, heading about 50 GoMs at one point!

FULL COVERAGE: P3,9

Worst shrink in Q1 GDP data shows economy is in ICU

SUNITHA NATTI

INDIA'S first quarter GDP shrunk to a level unknown in our economic history. At 23.9%, it's the sharpest contraction since 1996 when we began bean-counting quarterly data and probably the worst since 1980s. Assuming a 5-6% trendline growth, the effective output loss in Q1 is upwards ₹10 lakh crore. That's the national output lost, perhaps, forever, as Covid-19 cut the economy fiercer than a Samurai blade.

In absolute numbers, total output punched in at ₹26.9 lakh crore, down from ₹35 lakh crore last year. Worrying, nominal GDP — widely used in government estimates — contracted 20.6% or from ₹44.8 lakh crore to ₹35.6 lakh crore.

Just as misfortune conspires with bad luck during crises, several key metrics pounded each other into the ground leaving Asia's third-largest economy in a quicksand with both demand and supply side contraction standing witness.

On the supply side, all but agriculture saw a de-growth with some like construction, manufacturing and services contracting indecently at 40-50%. Demand side too mirrored this with investments shrinking 47%, while consumer spending saw a negative growth of 27%. Like in the past, government expenditure saved the day with 16.4% growth, but that's an impolite increase given the pandemic and the sovereign's role of riding to everyone's rescue. That said, excluding government spending, GDP would have contracted even worse by 30%. So that's some solace.

In essence, just two life-sustaining arteries — agriculture and government spending — pumped our economy. As if that's not disappointing, fiscal deficit data released separately showed that the government continued to pinch both revenue and capital spending. Whether this was anticipating lower tax receipts or fearing deficit scolds is unclear. Almost every country is emptying its public purse to fight the pandemic-led downturn, but India's fiscal deficit in July stood lower than June, reflecting overt caution against a debt binge.

Meanwhile, economists believe the latest data betrays the inferno inside as they expect revisions to toss shocking de-growth grenades later. Policy watcher Anil Sood offered some proof. Take inventory, which should have seen depletion because production was shut for two months. Instead, it recorded a quarterly increase similar to last year at ₹53,000 crore. Ditto consumption spending, which Sood thinks could be sharper than what's captured in Monday's provisional estimates.

Interestingly, valuables — including high value purchases — saw an unmistakable decline indicating spending curbs not just by lower income households, but also by India's burgeoisie and the super rich.

Moreover, given the unglamorous state of core sector data, chances are we are in a recession right now, though the official word will be out in November. In nearly seven decades, we've seen only four years of negative growth, but economic pundits are entering heavy discussions not about recession, but when the worst will be behind us, so recovery can begin.

Chief economic adviser K V Subramanian signalled that India was experiencing a V-shaped recovery with high frequency indicators like rail freight and power consumption showing promise. But even with some improvements in next three quarters, several believe the rate of FY21 contraction could be beyond -5%.

The choice for the government will be whether consumption or investment side needs to be pushed. Given the limited fiscal space economists believe a demand or consumption-led recovery is crucial for the economy, but that requires government measure to arrest job losses and increase disposable incomes.

FULL COVERAGE: P10

Some of the indicators used for GDP estimates

Indicators	FY21 Q1
Coal	-15
Crude oil	-6.5
Cement	-38.3
Steel	-56.8
Commercial vehicles	-84.8
Bank deposits	9.6
Bank credits	5.6
Mining	-22.4
Manufacturing	-40.7
Electricity	-15.8
Metallic minerals	-43.3

PLA bid to change LAC status quo foiled again

MAYANK SINGH AND PUSHKAR BANAKAR @New Delhi

A fresh confrontation is brewing in Eastern Ladakh with the Indian Army thwarting China's attempted ingress at a new point to change status quo on the intervening night of August 29 and 30.

Army spokesperson Colonel Aman Anand revealed the Chinese Army "carried out provocative military movements to change the status quo". "PLA troops violated previous consensus arrived at during military and diplomatic engagements during the ongoing stand-off in Eastern Ladakh," he added.

A senior Army officer added, "We were alert to such a step by the Chinese Army as even after a huge mobilisation of troops and equipment they have not been able to make much shift in the Line of Actual Control. With winter approaching things will become even more difficult for them."

Sources said nearly 200 PLA troops accompanied with the armoured vehicles were part of the attempted ingress on the Southern Bank of Pangong Tso Lake. Indian troops pre-empted and thwarted Chinese attempts to unilaterally change the situation on the ground. However, there was no clear word on whether or not there was any contact or clash between the two sides.

Army trucks move towards Ladakh via the Leh-Manali Highway, on Monday | PTI

"We expect retaliatory action. We are ready," said another officer. The Indian side called for a Brigade Commander level flag meeting at Chushul to resolve the issue.

For its part, China blamed India for the tension. Colonel Zhang Shuili, spokesperson of the Western Theater Command at Chengdu, said, "The Hunan coast and the nearby Reqin mountain pass once again illegally crossed the line and took control, blatantly provoking and causing tension on the border... China strongly opposes this. (sic)"

READY TO ROLL

- Metro services in a phased manner from Sept 7
- KR Market and Kalasipalya too will open today
- Religious, social, political gatherings, with a cap of 100 people, from Sept 21

Pubs, bars to open today with riders

BALA CHAUHAN @Bengaluru

PUBS and bars in the State will be allowed to serve alcohol in their premises for their dine-in customers from September 1 on condition that at no time they would have more than 50 per cent of occupancy. The watering holes have also been instructed to strictly follow the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) guidelines and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for Covid19.

The Government Order (GO) issued on Monday cleared the decks for the re-opening of pubs, bars and resto-bars, which were closed since March 24, when the first lockdown was announced as an extreme measure of precaution to contain the spread of the highly infectious virus. While there is enough emphasis on safety, there is no restriction on business timings. "They are allowed to function as per their licence condition," said a senior State Excise officer. Excise Commissioner, M Lokesh had presented the proposal on re-opening of pubs and bars last weekend to the government; soon after the MHA Unlock 4.0 guidelines were issued.

P7

EXPRESS READ

States can decide on quota for docs

The Supreme Court on Monday held that states are empowered to make special provisions for granting quota in admissions in PG courses to government doctors serving in remote areas.

SC asks Mallya to appear before it on October 5

The SC on Monday directed businessman Vijay Mallya to appear before it on October 5 while dismissing his plea seeking review of the 2017 verdict which held him guilty of contempt.

Tough SC language but token fine for Bhushan

KANU SARDA @New Delhi

THE Supreme Court on Monday imposed a token fine of ₹1 on senior advocate Prashant Bhushan after his conviction for contempt of court for his two tweets criticising the present Chief Justice of India (CJI) and his predecessors and said it was not afraid of either sentencing or debarring him from practice.

Hours later, Bhushan said he will respectfully pay the penalty while reserving the right to seek review of the conviction and sentencing.

A three-judge bench headed by Justice Arun Mishra while reading out the verdict said, "We are not afraid of sentencing the contemnor either with imprisonment or from debarring him from the practice. His conduct reflects adamance and ego, which has no place to exist in the system of administration of justice and in noble profession, and no remorse is shown for the harm done to the institution to which he belongs."

Bhushan was directed to pay the token penalty by September 15, failing which he will have to undergo simple imprisonment of three months and will be disbarred from practicing before the apex court for three years.

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